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Responses to Receiving Sexual Images Forwarded without Consent

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This study investigated responses to receiving a text message containing a sexual image shared without consent (e.g., unauthorized use of the sexual image). The study examined how the number of cyberbystanders, peer norms around sharing sexual images without consent, and victim blaming attitudes impacted the intent to intervene using vignettes in which a sexual image is forwarded without the consent of the individual in the image. It was hypothesized that consistent with previous research on the bystander effect, as group size (i.e., number of message recipients) increased, individuals would be less likely to act in helpful ways and more likely to do nothing. It was also hypothesized that individuals whose peers are more supportive of sharing images without consent and who attribute more blame to the victim would be less likely to have prosocial responses. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three hypothetical scenarios in which they receive a sexual image without consent, and that varied according to the number of message recipients (one recipient, multiple recipients, unknown number).

After controlling for peer norms and victim blame, group size did not predict responses. Peer norms predicted both helpful and unhelpful responses, and victim blame was related to helping behaviours only. Women were also significantly more likely to report helpful responses than men. There were some similarities to bystander responses in other situations of actual or potential sexual violence, such as the importance of peer group attitudes and higher intent to intervene among women, but there were also differences, in that group size was insignificant. This study suggests that peer attitudes may be an important focal point for interventions designed to stop the use of sexual images without consent. Many factors that may influence unauthorized use of sexual images remain unexplored, and more research is needed.